



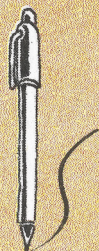
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field works from the
Distant Voices project



PHIL CROCKETT THOMAS



Stir

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Distant Voices project

Phil Crockett Thomas

First published in 2020 by the Distant Voices project. The University of Glasgow, Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, Ivy Lodge, 63 Gibson Street, Glasgow, G12 8LR, and Vox Liminis, The Glasgow Collective, 217 Gallowgate, Glasgow, G1 5DX. An earlier version of the poem 'Still Game' is published in Glasgow: Historical City (2020) Glasgow: Seahorse Publications, edited by Linda Jackson.

ISBN: 978-0-85261-970-4 (0 85261 970 7)

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<https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/>.

Front cover design by Nathaniel Walpole.
Typesetting by Ryan Vance.

This work was supported using public funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: ES/P002536/1).

<https://crowdedmouth.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/projects/distant-voices/>

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These Boys

These boys are all fathers
or will be soon so they
can cradle some soft thing
and smile.

In the baby harness
he goes up like Peter Pan
teasing the audience
briefly as white as his trainers.

The parole board say
“it’s good for the boy
a baby will keep him grounded.”

Bower Bird, 1

“He’s the sort
to grab a rock
and smash a window just
to get sent back in.”

I put the bag down on the table
crossed onions with rhyming dictionaries:
 (bunions
 minions).

Thankfully no one ate my error.

The next day he brought us apples
like bloody pointed teeth.
He said that they hurt his
disguised a gift as a warning.

Cigarette in his left bow-fingers
the pair on his right pulse
the button in his throat
as he names each bird
nesting under the lid of the hall.

He goes on.
Sees gulls out loud
as if I had never
(never mind).
I let him teach because.

Words fleshed out
by a soft machine. His fix visible
a cyborg no older than my dad
(because my dad)
takes my hand
and presses into it a bit of gravel
rasps “this stone is special
but no one’s even noticed it!”

We write a song about his television
sound furnishes the nest.

Head cocked, ecstatic
he weathers floods and famine
gleaning things to care for
from the thatch of a world
that has nowhere else to put him.

Scales

The library fridge is full
of small milk bottles.

A different vintage
for each shade of green.

The food here is made
by exclusive brands.

Bags of crisps a fraction smaller
the taste all out of kilter.

It's like that aspirational
furniture shop you worked in.

Design classics at cut prices
and sizes to limbo under the copyright.

You'd watch shoppers squeeze into the chairs
and try to convince themselves
it felt like home.

Fish Story

Probably the water was
something to be slipped through
to smile at with masked eyes.
This part, especially
moss green with mineral blue
in the bowl of the mountains.

Unfelt and elsewhere
too far on foot to feel it
the fire!

Implored by the undertow
hands scooping up water
to slap at the face.
Liquid ruddy with danger
no siren song at such depths
he is plucked from the pressure
by pernickety aliens.

In the palm of King Kong
nursed then dropped.
His bottle crushed
he is unwound.
A toasted frog or fish-man
branched in the trees.
Send in the surgeons draped in ropes.

Bower Bird, 2

Tame
the robin
might still
be there:
 visiting or red-breast up
under a
running machine.

The women don't use the gym.
Sat in tracksuits coloured grey
as pumice
like their food, no water
will be squeezed from these stones
that smile shyly
some scatty as schoolgirls.

Rapt hands press out scissor-free decoupage
tender attention to scenes of normal life
signs of struggle nonetheless.

Loaves of bread are milled by the rain
as they shiver on silver carts outside the hall
abandoned in a sudden shower.

We inspect
pale sandwich fillings that have been hastily spread
the contents restrained by cling film.

Almost charmed by the glitter on the floor
a sprinkling

These chairs cannot be weaponised.

We are singing in the broom cupboard.

Count the pens back into the bag and
moisten the dust.

Paper kittens, hearts and flowers –
The bird is gone – bedecked in decoupage
or binned.

Punishment Exercise

I am worried for
her edges
or lack of them
like my body
in the mortuary
if the plastic
gloves come off
like my body
in the mortuary
I have never
been that open
they are working
on sharpening her edges
with colouring books
that teach her to
stay within the lines
to colour balance
to read the wheel
“Do you touch people
when you talk to them?
An elbow
a cheek?”

Think back
rewind
backwards
something of her
has peeled away and stowed
up along my calf, an itch
tracing the line of motion
heads shoulders, you know the rest
it's my mother with her 'sticky willies'
I walk the story back through the bushes
where she strips and sharpens the green
“there that's yours now –
stuck to your back
you won't even feel it.”
I outline her here
in the mortuary again
mum says:
“that's you that is.”

The Grapevine

Disconnected from the mains
these pipes still burn ears
and warm the hands
rubbed together at the cheeky cunt
who's gonnae get it in the morning.

Copper vines hang low with juice
stale jokes, wraps of tobacco.
Blithe accident of modernisation
counterpoint to the window warriors.

Locked out of the flat in my pyjamas
smelling of sleep and panic
I sat in the hallway
waiting to be rescued.

Brow against the hollow wall
I gripped my phone tightly and
listened to my neighbour's toddler
prattling through the vent.

Still Game

He drags his invisible dead like cans behind a car
The years have stripped the sound
to a soft scraping of tongue on palate
The words don't come, his wife
is still-born every morning.

His guard, who claims to be a friend of old
says, "every year is harder for us both."
This prison officer, a livid nosed, self-diagnosed
lonesome cowboy
tells us, "no one out there understands
the bond between us and them."

Them stay quiet
He beams, this buckaroo
is dressed in double denim.

These two -
a salt and pepper set
sat across the table
submitting to our instructions:
working up metaphors

or, as it turns out to be
tattoo designs.
Blank scrolls scalloped in ornate biro
waiting for the names of loved ones
to be committed.

Requiem

She is making a song for Katie.
A requiem with no words
but the chords conjure pinks and grey,
and Paris in old movies.

On the banks of the River Seine
a bangle drops down her arm
at a feminine gesture:
tucking hair behind her ear – imagine
if being watched could once more be a pleasure.

Inquiry

Did the inspector
call it a 'leading edge' prison
to avoid the association of wounds
and blades in the more familiar phrase?

Borrowing the aeronautic note
of tilting proud into the wind
but not at windmills, something
designed for flight not failure.

Still, these careful words
reveal.

Kintsugi

A crooked flagpole
set in concrete and soft mud
it bullies the earth.

You want to know me
pressing knuckles to the wedge of my skull
the edge of the world, its hinge.

A gentle pop and you lie back
arms crossed along my ridge
like a baptist in the water.

That's better, stagger
take off your shirt,
breathe out for me
make your ribs an ark.

Hot bellied baby,
against a metal disk that
hears the life inside of me.

Your hands span,
counting out a sum of skull
in exacting science.

Callipers inch my spine,
how flat does your tongue go?

What would it cost to post, second-class?

Note the slight curvature of spine
a wavering bone, a fact, inoperable.

Leaping but lacking arches
pain blossoms up my legs.
A dropped metatarsal
is that some kind of dinosaur?

I learn to pick up marbles with my toes
feet otherwise untouchable.
My pelvis in three
a bowl fixed with gold leaf
bones rubbing like a baby's head
still unsoldered.

Sometimes you are Floodlit

You tell me that

Sometimes
were bunked and bedded
in dark luxuriating

It is surprising
to be fished out you say
to count out
the bodies

in case you've tried to off yourself
or are getting off with someone
as if you could have gone somewhere.

health and safety
gone mad
the screws are not all bad.
Some just use a torch

and let you get on with it.

Notes on the Poems

Stir (2020) is a collection of poems which were written while I was the research associate on the Distant Voices project (2017-2021).¹ I'm a visual sociologist (sociologist with an art practice as part of their approach) and these poems reflect on my experience of doing ethnographic research in carceral spaces, written from the perspective of an outsider with a pass that allowed access for a limited time only. Most of the poems were first shared as a weekly TinyLetter email in the summer of 2020 during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic 'lockdown'.

These Boys:

We did a workshop in a prison which held boys and young men aged 16-21. There was an informal economy involving trainers – white ones being the most prized and, as they joked, easier to keep pristine in prison. I was struck by the contrast between the perpetual last-day-of-school energy, and the way that the responsibilities of fatherhood seemed to be encouraged as a panacea. The detail about the parole board comes from conversations with a friend about how personal relationships and parenthood are taken into account when you are being risk assessed during your progression through the system.

Bower Bird, 1:

The team always brought food in to share during workshops, which often meant walking around supermarkets when they had just opened. On this occasion I had sleepily grabbed a bag of onions thinking that they were apples. The man that inspired this poem is often on my mind.

Scales:

This poem is from the first time I went into a prison and we worked on songs in the library.

Fish Story:

This poem was written during a song writing workshop whilst all our participants were quietly concentrating on writing lyrics. Our workshops always have a theme – for those who like to work in that way – and this time it was ‘the big blue’. There was lots of talk about the contrast between the smooth surface of water and its deep mysteries and dangers. On the previous weekend I had been walking by Loch Lomond, and on seeing a seaplane one of my companions told me a tall tale about a scuba diver being accidentally scooped up by a plane collecting water to put out a forest fire and dropped onto the burning trees.

Punishment Exercise:

This is the poem I was most hesitant to share as it explores painful aspects of my own biography. It was inspired by a disquieting encounter with a young woman in prison, who had been given an educational colouring book to help her address her ‘problematic’ lack of personal boundaries. ‘Sticky willies’ is slang for galium aparine, a type of creeping plant that sticks itself to clothing and fur with its small hooked hairs.

The Grapevine:

‘The grapevine’ is a rumoured network of old pipes re-purposed for secret communication between cells in one of the halls of a prison we worked in. ‘Window warriors’ is slang for another form of illicit prison communication, shouting out of the cell windows.

Requiem:

The songwriter was the only woman on the wing with a guitar, so she played for everyone. She was working on a song for Katie Allan who had been housed in the same wing when she died by suicide.

Inquiry:

This poem was inspired by reading the summary report on an inspection of the prison where Katie Allan and William Lindsay died by suicide in 2018.

Kintsugi:

I started writing this autobiographical poem during a session where we had a big creative team so I didn’t need to spend so much time helping people work on their lyrics. At the time I was reading Moby Dick by Herman Melville and attracted and repelled by the line:

‘I believe that much of a man’s character will be found betokened in his backbone. I would rather feel your spine than your skull, whoever you are. A thin joist of a spine never yet upheld a full and noble soul. I rejoice in my spine, as in the firm audacious staff of that flag which I fling half out to the world.’

Postscript

Names

The title of the collection references a slang term for prison (as in ‘to go stir-crazy’). The ‘field works’ of the subtitle refers to the fact that these poems all originated from my participation in song writing workshops in criminal justice settings (three prisons and a ‘young offenders’ institution), which formed an important part of the fieldwork for Distant Voices.

Part of my role in these workshops was to write notes about what I observed and experienced, and I found that my practice as a fiction writer led naturally to the production of poetic, fragmentary fieldnotes (e.g. the poems *Still Game*, *Bower Bird 1 and 2*). I was also drawn to write in this way because, rather than observing at a distance, I took up a creative role in the workshops, often co-writing song lyrics with participants and occasionally leading creative writing exercises. During quiet moments I even managed to write a few poems (*Fish Story* and *Kintsugi*). Other poems emerged through later reflection (e.g. *Punishment Exercise*, *Scales*).

Although I am the author of these poems and the responsibility for the content is mine, Distant Voices is a collaborative project and these poems are indebted to my colleagues in the project and workshop participants. We research with people who have diverse experiences and perspectives on punishment (e.g. as people who have been harmed by crime, prisoners, prison staff, people with experience of custody, their families). Many of the people who work on or have participated in the project have experience of more than one of these experiences. For example, they are survivors of harm as well as people who have been punished. With this diversity, it’s important to stress that these poems only speak to my experiences and perceptions rather than for the project as a whole.

With this in mind, I had some qualms about which pronouns to use. I was worried that using ‘they’ for prisoners or prison staff might seem ‘othering’. I experimented with a more inclusive ‘we’, but this seemed confusing and flattened important differences. ‘We’ also risked claiming other’s experiences as my own, or of suggesting that others shared my views. In some of the poems I have used ‘you’ as an invitation to the audience to imagine themselves into the scenario. I have not solved these representational problems.

Why am I sharing these poems?

As I have noted, stir is slang for prison. However, to stir is also to emotionally move or affect; to change in some way via an encounter with someone or something. One of the aspects I have found hardest about undertaking this fieldwork is spending an intense period of time working with people to make songs, being stirred by and building connections with people in custody and then having to leave, potentially never to meet them again. These poems are a testament to this experience of connection and separation which faintly echoes the much more devastating separation of people in custody from the world outside. These privations have increased during the Covid-19 pandemic with the curtailment of visits and activities.

Theodor Adorno wrote that, ‘the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass.’² His aphorism makes me think about how pain can focus one’s attention, but also that pain can act to distort perception. These are sad, angry, occasionally hopeful poems born out of glimpsing the trauma of imprisonment and the struggle to live well in that environment. They are written through the eyes of an outsider who has had limited access to prisons and who has only been inside for a few days at a time.

Poetry and research or poetry as research

Inspired by actor-network theory, I have come to think about research as a form of translation, by which I mean a process of transforming experience and information into different forms, primarily written texts. Like other researchers, for example Bruno Latour,³ I am interested in the gap between translations – the information that cannot or will not be translated. Aptly the poet Robert Frost claimed that ‘poetry is what’s lost in translation’. Fiona Sampson helpfully re-phrases this as: ‘poetry is what’s lost in paraphrase. To write a synopsis of a poem is to lose its uniqueness.’⁴ These poems contain insights about the research that are not present in some of the other forms that the research takes. They aspire to translate the emotion of the experience into the texture of the poem so that the reader can take that away with them.

I am certainly not the first social scientist to write poetry and share it. I gained much from studying with the brilliant sociologist and poet Yasmin Gunaratnam at Goldsmiths, University of London. As writing is a big part of the academic life I am sure that there is a lot more poetic ‘writing for the desk drawer’ that exists. The different names self-applied to work that does get shared by practitioners, such as ‘field poetry’,⁵ ‘poetic transcription’,⁶ or ‘poetic inquiry’⁷ mark these poems as like, but not quite, poetry. They remind us that they are meant to be seen as research.⁸

Many of the pioneers of this approach in the 1980s and 1990s were feminist scholars who, concerned with the ethics of representation in their work, saw the potential of developing ‘found poetry’ (i.e. poetry where you work to re-order pre-existing text) for working with their interview material in ways that more better reflected their participants voices.⁹ These researchers also hoped that poetry might be more accessible to readers beyond the realm of academia. Whilst this approach was gaining credibility in the 1990s, there were still

strong criticisms from within the social sciences. For example, the sociologist Michael Schwalbe worried that readers might be unable to determine how much they should trust the researcher’s account of real social life if we stopped following the ‘rules’ of sociological writing.¹⁰ He also worried that poetry was inaccessible to most readers, arguing:

‘If ethnography and qualitative analysis are supposed to make the worlds and experiences of people understandable to others, then the creation of access, via language, is a defining feature of the craft... Using a restricted code, whether academic or literary, defeats the purpose of the craft, which is, in part, to break codes and let others in.’¹¹

Although I don’t think Schwalbe is entirely fair here either to social research or poetry, one of my worries in writing and sharing this work was that poetry is widely seen as opaque, obscure or self-referential, and therefore perhaps elitist. In his book *The Hatred of Poetry* the poet and novelist Ben Lerner writes about the impossible task given to poets, that what they write should be simultaneously comprehensible to all without an education in poetic form, but yet also be unique enough to further the art form and justify publication.¹²

‘Found poetry’ is still the most common creative approach taken by social scientists who wish to work in this way. A number of factors mean that this is unsurprising. For example, the desire to stick closely to research participants’ recorded speech; because practically it is less intimidating than starting a poem with a blank page; and because found poetry makes the gap between data (interview transcripts, fieldnotes) and the translated findings (poem) seem small, and therefore more ‘scientific’ than creative approaches which don’t limit themselves to participant’s words.¹³ Increasingly, however, there are scholars (including

myself) who might use some found text but don't constrain themselves to existing data, and instead develop poems as a way of thinking through research experiences and communicating them to others.

Who's speaking?

Although lots of poets create characters and write in different voices, or depict imagined scenarios in their work, poetry is often associated with a first-person perspective, and a speaking 'I' that is reflecting on authentic experiences and feelings. Unlike the sociological fiction I have previously written which works with created characters, these poems are from my perspective, and I've mostly written about things I directly experienced. This lack of poetic license is something that marks these 'field works' as distinct from poetry.

Initially most of the poems only included descriptions of the social dynamics, events and sensations experienced during the song writing sessions. I tried to keep myself out of them as much as is possible, or at least provide no image of myself other than the outline provided by what I have chosen to write about. Although, even if one aimed to be purely descriptive,

*'A poem is never a holiday snap. Instead poetic material is a mixture of emotion, observation, insight, preoccupation. It is, in short, a mixture of elements very much like the self who writes.'*¹⁴

Gradually, personal details started to creep into the poems, because you don't leave the rest of your life at the door when you enter a prison or begin a piece of research. A prison has a social configuration which triggers reflections on one's experiences of other social configurations,

however in making these connections I am not seeking to claim equivalence to the experience of imprisonment, because I have not experienced that.

Finally, 'stir' also links to the metaphor of making trouble, or 'stirring the pot' and setting something in motion. Can poetry make trouble? Hopefully, even if it's only in moving us to imagine how things could be different. As researcher-poet Laurel Richardson wrote:

*'poetry is a practical and powerful means for [the] reconstitution of worlds.'*¹⁵

October 2020

Endnotes

- 1 Distant Voices aims to explore and practice re/integration after punishment through creative collaborations (primarily songwriting) and action-research. It is a partnership between the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the West of Scotland, and the arts charity Vox Liminis, all based in Scotland. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: ES/P002536/1).
- 2 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London : New York: Verso, 2005), 50.
- 3 Bruno Latour, 'The More Manipulations, the Better...', in *Representation in Scientific Practice Revisited*, ed. Catelijne Coopmans et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 347-350.
- 4 Fiona Sampson, *Poetry Writing: The Expert Guide* (London: Robert Hale, 2009), 14.
- 5 Toni Flores, 'Field Poetry', *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1982): 16-22.
- 6 Corrine Glesne, 'That Rare Feeling: Re-Presenting Research Through Poetic Transcription', *Qualitative Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (1997): 202-21.
- 7 Lynn Butler-Kisber, 'Artful Portrayals in Qualitative Research: The Road to Found Poetry and Beyond', *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research* XLVIII, no. 3 (2002): 229-39.
- 8 For those who are interested in learning more about the history and practices of this approach I recommend Monica Prendergast, "'Poem Is What?'" Poetic Inquiry in Qualitative Social Science Research', *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 4 (2009): 541-68; Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Based Perspectives* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019).
- 9 Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3.
- 10 Michael Schwalbe, 'The Responsibilities of Sociological Poets', *Qualitative Sociology* 18, no. 4 (1995): 398.
- 11 Schwalbe, 396-97.
- 12 Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), 41.
- 13 Here I have drawn inspiration from Michael Guggenheim's brilliant discussion of the privileging of photography over drawing within visual sociology. Michael Guggenheim, 'The Media of Sociology: Tight or Loose Translations?', *The British Journal of Sociology* 66, no. 2 (June 2015): 345-72.
- 14 Sampson, *Poetry Writing*, 20.
- 15 Laurel Richardson, 'Poetics, Dramatics, and Transgressive Validity: The Case of the Skipped Line', *The Sociological Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1993): 705.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

These poems are dedicated in love and solidarity to our research participants that I can't name, and to my friends and colleagues in Distant Voices, in particular: Alison, Claire, Colleen, Dave, Donna, Fergus, Graeme, Jo, Lisa, Louis, Lucy, Oliver, Rollo, and Rosie.

Thanks to Edwina Attlee for editing my poems so deftly, to Nathaniel Walpole for his thoughtful cover design, and to Ryan Vance for his book design. Thanks to Matt for everything.

